

Ballads

Popular Poetry

What Is a Ballad?

A ballad is a song or songlike poem that tells a story.

- The word *ballad* originally derived from an Old French word meaning “dancing song.”



British Library, London

Illumination from a French manuscript of
Romance of the Rose (detail) (15th Century).

Types of Ballads

There are two types of ballads.

- Folk ballads
- Literary ballads

Folk Ballads

Folk ballads were originally composed by anonymous singers and were passed down orally from generation to generation before they were written down.

- The English folk ballads we read today
 - probably took their present form in the fifteenth century
 - originated in and around the British Isles
 - were collected and printed in the 1700s by Sir Thomas Percy and Sir Walter Scott

Literary Ballads

Literary ballads are composed and written down by known poets, usually in the style of folk ballads.

- *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798) by Samuel Taylor Coleridge
- “We Are Seven” (1798) by William Wordsworth
- “La Belle Dame sans Merci” (1819) by John Keats
- “Is My Team Ploughing” (1896) by A. E. Housman

Ballad Stanzas

Ballads are often written in ballad stanzas, which usually have

- four lines
- four accented syllables in lines one and three
- three accented syllables in lines two and four
- an *abcb* rhyme scheme

Ballad Stanzas

He holds him with his glittering eye— *a*
The Wedding Guest stood still, *b*
And listens like a three years' child: *c*
The Mariner hath his will. *b*

The Wedding Guest sat on a stone: *a*
He cannot choose but hear; *b*
And thus spake on that ancient man, *c*
The bright-eyed Mariner. *b*

from *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* by Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Characteristics of Ballads

Ballads often

- deal with supernatural events
- tell sensational, sordid, or tragic stories
- have a strong, simple beat
- use a great deal of repetition
 - refrain—a repeated word, phrase, line, or group of lines
 - incremental repetition—a phrase or sentence with a new element added each time it is repeated

Characteristics of Ballads

- use a question-and-answer format
- omit details
- contain conventional phrases that have meanings beyond their literal ones
 - The phrases “make my bed” or “make my bed narrow” mean that the characters are preparing for death.

What Have You Learned?

1. The word “ballad” comes from a _____ word.
a. German b. French c. Italian
2. Folk ballads were passed down from generation to generation through _____.
a. books b. newspapers c. word of mouth
3. A _____ is not a characteristic of ballads.
a. tragic story b. refrain c. complicated beat
4. The rhyme scheme of a ballad is _____.
a. *abcd* b. *abcb* c. *aabb*

The End